

VZCZCXRO1009  
PP RUEHTRO  
DE RUEHAS #0223/01 0601011  
ZNY SSSSS ZZH  
P 291011Z FEB 08  
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5328  
INFO RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2573  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 8824  
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2195  
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7046  
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI  
RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6244  
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1487  
RUEHBP/AMEMBASSY BAMAKO 0436  
RUEHLB/AMEMBASSY BEIRUT 0435  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS 1495  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO 1007  
RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV 2059  
RUEHJM/AMCONSUL JERUSALEM 0644  
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3278  
RHMFISS/HQ USEUCOM VAIHINGEN GE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000223

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/27/2023

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: BOUTEFLLIKA LOOKS TO THE LEVANT WITH A/S WELCH

REF: 07 ALGIERS 1070

Classified By: Political-Economic Section Chief Mark Schapiro; reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S) SUMMARY: In a three-hour tour d'horizon with NEA Assistant Secretary C. David Welch, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika provided his candid opinions on a wide range of issues (septel), but spoke at length about the Levant. He revealed his personal views on Syrian interference in Lebanon, the upcoming March 29-30 Arab League summit in Damascus, as well as on the standoff between Fatah and Hamas in the Palestinian territories. Bouteflika was clear, focused and engaged, and appeared in good health throughout the meeting. END SUMMARY.

SYRIA: LOST SOME CREDIBILITY  
-----

12. (S) Calling Lebanon "the most civilized country in the Arab world," Bouteflika told A/S Welch that he saw it as a "mosaic," a shining example of coexistence in the Middle East. In Bouteflika's view, Syria had no need for army and intelligence services inside Lebanon, since with the reality of countless intermarriages and ties between Syria and Lebanon, Syria "is present in the daily life of Lebanon." Because of this, he could not understand why Syria felt so threatened by the Siniora government, unless "there is something we do not know." He elaborated on this point somewhat by pointing to the investigation into the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, saying that despite some suggestions that Syria might not actually be responsible for the killing, "it is behaving as though it is guilty."

13. (S) In Bouteflika's eyes, Syria lost a great deal of credibility within the Arab world over Lebanon when Arabs saw Syria give agreement on a Lebanese president, only to subsequently withdraw it. This was one reason behind a deep suspicion between Damascus and the Siniora government, a mistrust Bouteflika felt would continue "as long as Damascus feels it does not have its people in power" in Lebanon. Given Syria's credibility issue, Bouteflika said that there was no way to escape from the Arab world platform, saying he believed strongly in presenting a common Arab League position

as articulated by Amr Moussa. He conceded that A/S Welch and the U.S. know more about Lebanon and could therefore play an important role in promoting a stable Lebanese government. However, Bouteflika cautioned that any efforts to support Lebanese sovereignty should be pursued in a tactful way, as the U.S. role would cease to be useful if Syria were given any opportunity to brand publicly a given initiative as a U.S. or French policy.

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON?  
-----

14. (S) One of the reasons Syrian credibility has suffered and the Arab League has had difficulty gaining traction in Lebanon, Bouteflika acknowledged, was because Syrian President Bashar al-Asad did not quite measure up to his father. Bouteflika called Hafez al-Asad "the Bismarck of the region," gushing with praise for Hafez as a statesman and one who understood his limits. Bouteflika cited a 1970s anecdote, saying Algerian-Syrian relations had been frosty after Algeria stood up to Syria after it invaded Lebanon. According to Bouteflika, the Algerian president told Hafez al-Asad "Syria is not the USSR and Lebanon is not Czechoslovakia." Once Egyptian President Anwar Sadat made his historic visit to Jerusalem, Bouteflika said Hafez al-Asad realized what was to come and promptly picked up the phone to call then-Algerian President Houari Boumediene, asking simply "well, what now?" Bouteflika did give Bashar credit for doing something his father never would have, when he visited Beirut to attend an international conference. This, he said, at least gave the appearance of Lebanese sovereignty.

ALGIERS 00000223 002 OF 002

BOUTEFLIKA GOING TO DAMASCUS, AT LEAST ONCE  
-----

15. (S) Bouteflika acknowledged A/S Welch's point that Algeria and other regional countries had an important role to play in addressing the question of Syria's role in Lebanon, and said that "he owed Bashar a state visit" and would use such an opportunity to "tell him the truth." Bouteflika said he felt that Algeria would have credibility in Syrian eyes, since "we have nothing at stake" in issues such as Shebaa Farms which, to him, are merely "an overload" and completely unimportant. He also said he would also make the point that Hezbollah needed to try to "see things another way," since "life is not perpetual war." It was time for Syria to come back to the international arena "with dignity," that would allow discussions of returning the Golan Heights for a final peace agreement to resume.

16. (S) Bouteflika told A/S Welch that he intended to go to Damascus to attend the March 29-30 Arab League Summit, but said that the road to Damascus would be difficult given the divisions within the Arab world. Bouteflika said that Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak had invited him and Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi to visit on their way to Damascus, intending to broker greater consensus among Arab leaders. The problem, as Bouteflika explained to former APHSCT Frances F. Townsend in July 2007 (reftel), is the ongoing feud between Qaddafi and Saudi King Abdallah. Bouteflika made it clear that this feud continues to prevent an Arab consensus on issues like Lebanon, since "if Qaddafi goes to Damascus, the Saudis will not go, and if Saudi Arabia is not there, this is a big problem for the Arabs." At least, Bouteflika sighed, Mubarak was trying to resolve the impasse, and "I am trying to work with Qaddafi as well."

ON HAMAS AND FATAH  
-----

17. (S) Bouteflika made clear his opposition to Islamists such as Hamas, saying their position resembled Algeria's in the 1960s, and "there is nothing new we can learn from them." He

viewed Hamas as a symptom of a larger resurgence of Islamist political movements in the Middle East writ large, but said that the only way forward was for Fatah and Hamas to meet, and "this meeting cannot be a civil war." Although he cited the necessity of including Hamas for a stable Palestinian future, Bouteflika made it clear which horse he backs. Abu Mazen, he said, "is the only Palestinian voice that can lead somewhere." As a result, Bouteflika intended to continue channeling all of Algeria's financial support to Fatah, saying he planned to give him "another check" in Damascus in front of Amr Moussa who would serve as "a moral witness." However, Bouteflika did have some criticism for Abu Mazen, saying he was at times so rational as to be "more royal than the king," and should yield something in his negotiations with Hamas in order to allow them to save face and find an accommodation.

18. (S) In conclusion, Bouteflika opined that the problem of the Levant was that "as soon as we start talking about elections, it gets very complicated," saying that election results such as those that brought Hamas to power in the Palestinian territories can destabilize countries as far away as Algeria.

19. (U) This cable has been cleared by A/S Welch.  
FORD